

FBI Investigated Women's Groups For Four Years

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Using female informers to provide details its male agents could not obtain, the FBI investigated women's rights groups for at least four years—learning among other things that a New York group used actor Paul Newman's telephone credit card.

The investigation, which apparently ended in the spring of 1973, never resulted in any criminal charges. But it provided a catalogue of information about the political beliefs and sexual preferences of activist women throughout the nation.

In a response to a Freedom of Information Act request, the FBI made public 1,377 pages from its file on the women's liberation movement, or WLM as it was known to the FBI.

The documents were censored to eliminate the names of informers and of some, but not all, of the individuals under investigation.

But it was clear that the FBI made extensive use of informers, probably members of the groups that were being studied.

For instance, a May 28, 1969, report from the New York FBI office to FBI headquarters in Washington contained items such as this: "[Name deleted] advised that a WLM meeting was held on 4-6-69, at 518 East Sixth St., New York City. Each woman at this meeting stated why she had come to the meeting and how she felt oppressed, sexually or otherwise."

The New York field office filed longer and more detailed accounts of women's activities than other offices, but the file showed that the investigation was conducted by FBI offices in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, Baltimore, Boston, Cincinnati, Seattle, Portland, Philadelphia, Chicago, Newark, N.J., St. Petersburg, Fla., and other cities.

The New York office filed an inch-thick report on women's activities in that city on Aug. 14, 1970. It said there were 3,200 names, "not all of them radicals," on the mailing list of the Women's Liberation Center (WLC) on West 22d Street. The portion of the file that was made public did not indicate whether the informer gave the mailing list to the FBI.

According to the New York office report:

- "A notice was posted, as of May 25, 1970 . . . recommending that women use Paul Newman's credit card number when dialing long distance."
- "During a meeting at WLC June 11, 1970, discussion was held regarding

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the use of a mailing list of the center. It was decided that Bella Abzug [then a candidate for Congress] should not be allowed to use the center's mailing list, as this would enable her to 'organize out of the center' and 'promote her politics.' "

• "Karate classes are being organized and are held at the center."

There was no indication from the report whether Newman had authorized use of his credit card. Unauthorized use of telephone credit cards for interstate calls is a federal crime. The report contained no indication whether the FBI pursued the question.

Early in the investigation several field offices suggested that there was nothing about women's liberation groups which should concern the FBI. But then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover overrode his subordinates and demanded the collection of information.

On May 26, 1969, a little more than three months after the date of the first document in the file, the Washington office sent Hoover a copy of a newspaper article which it said "best

illustrates WFO (Washington field office) belief that captioned organization does not presently constitute an activity requiring active investigation under applicable instructions and regulations."

Three months later, Aug. 11, 1969, the San Francisco office told Hoover: "The Women's Liberation Movement may be considered as subversive to the New Left and revolutionary movements as they have proven to be a divisive and factionalizing factor . . . It could be well recommended as a counter intelligence movement to weaken the revolutionary movement." Later San Francisco and Chicago formally requested permission to close the case. In May, 1970, Hoover rejected the request.

"It is absolutely essential that he conduct sufficient investigation to clearly establish subversive ramifications of the WLM and to determine the potential for violence presented by the various groups connected with this movement as well as any possible threat they may represent to the internal security of the United States," Hoover wrote.

It was not until after Hoover's death in May, 1972, that the investiga-

tion was terminated. The file ended with a series of memos from field offices halting the probe. The last document was dated April 25, 1973.

In addition to using informers, the bureau assigned its regular agents to watch rallies and demonstrations by women's groups. The reports contained frequent unflattering references to the appearance of militant women. They also contained sexual reference, especially suggestions that the women's movement was dominated by lesbians.

"Some homosexual delegates in attendance openly expressed their tendencies in public," the Seattle field office telegraphed Hoover on July 27, 1970, reporting on a conference held the day before at Eugene, Ore.

Three weeks later, Seattle sent Hoover a detailed report on the conference, including a 95-page transcript of its proceedings, apparently transcribed from a tape recorder used by an informer who attended.

"The women, in general, appeared to be hippies, lesbians, or from other far-out groups," the report said. "Most of them were very colorfully dressed, but the majority wore faded blue jeans. Most seemed to be making a

real attempt to be attractive."

A report from Philadelphia to Hoover in October, 1970, related that "(informer's name deleted) talked to a woman who identified herself as (name deleted), said each attendee should expect to contribute \$1 and should bring food and wine. She said two films would be shown, one on abortion and the other on an actual sex act being performed. The film on the latter subject was to be narrated by one of the women who participated who would describe her feelings at the time."

The Boston office told Hoover Aug. 26, 1970, that during a Women's Rights Day demonstration, "male on-lookers were diverted to nearby fountain which had been taken over by female bathers."

The documents did not indicate what use the FBI made of the information.

Included in the file was a number of newspaper articles and pamphlets. There also was a script of a statement accusing the women's movement of being Communist-dominated which was used by "Let Freedom Ring," a conservative group that provides recorded statements that can be obtained by telephone.